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ABSTRACT

Reasons that businesses might wish to hire Ph.D.s from the traditional liberal arts disciplines are identified. Ph.D.s from the liberal arts disciplines are able to provide a number of strong management skills and their education prepares them to succeed in the difficult and often changing business environment. Four theses are elaborated: (1) individuals who have completed Ph.D.s in liberal arts disciplines possess a number of attributes whose strength and usefulness to the nonacademic sectors of society have either been underestimated or ignored; (2) the results of graduate humanities and social science education are comparable to programs in management and business administration; (3) the ability to place academics in nonacademic careers need not undermine the autonomy and integrity of the liberal arts in particular, or higher education in general; and (4) the movement of Ph.D.s into business, government, and non-for-profit sectors will enhance greater pluralism in these settings, and sustain democratic institutions. Problems that may hinder a Ph.D.'s success at management include: working as part of a team, relinquishing ownership of the products of their work, and the value generally placed on assertiveness in the business world. (SW)

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"The Ph.D. as Business Manager: Myths and Realities of Education and Leadership," presented at the 11th Annual Meeting of the Society of Educators and Scholars, Bellarmine College, Louisville, October 10-11, 1986.

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ABSTRACT

Businesses that seek a strong management team ought to give serious consideration to hiring Ph.D.s from the traditional liberal arts disciplines. Ph.D.s are able to provide a number of strong management skills, but more importantly, their education prepares them to succeed in today's turbulent and often changing business environment. Several problems that may hinder a Ph.D.'s success at management are discussed.

Government, not-for-profit, and business leaders have recently decried the quality of the pool of talent from which they draw their managers and administrators. The narrow, technical, and quantitative focus of a number of business administration programs has been criticized by individuals who recognize the need for visionary, creative, eclectic, and interdisciplinary problem-solving skills. These latter virtues, it is asserted, are essential to successful management practice. But even seasoned business leaders recognize the difficulty in finding such abilities among the most recent B.A. and M.B.A. graduates.

The search for the ideal management protége continues, but to little avail. How could it be otherwise, given the requirements and expectations that business leaders place on these "corporate coutiers, including

Broad intellectual reach

Unfailing ability to produce results on schedule, with attention to detail and "bottom-line" practicality

Ability to work effectively with people of all types and educational backgrounds, regardless of professional role or function

Capability to respond quickly and efficiently to change including sudden shifts of direction in function, task, strategy

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Willingness to relinquish personal credit for work completed, subscribing instead to a "team" or company ethic that places more importance on work well done than on who did it

Clear concise and straightforward communication skills, both verbal and written

Ability to deal with the operational side of the business and to handle necessary, day-to-day tasks, while still enjoying and feeling stimulated by the total job

Long-term commitment to the company and unquestionable staying power/1/

My task in this paper is to support the claim that Ph.D.s from liberal arts disciplines possess a number of these attributes and strengths. Ph.D.s, career academics, and business leaders have consistently failed to recognize the communication, analytic, and problem-solving abilities that Ph.D.s develop in their study and work; the ease with which this preparation permits them to move into new careers; and the competitive edge that a mature and self-confident academic may drawn on in various management environments. Indeed, one's attitude toward Ph.D. career transitions reflects a fundamental assumption about the way that liberal education, professional specialization, and the world of work are understood to relate.

The elaboration of four theses will in part justify this central claim.

Thesis 1. Individuals who have completed Ph.D.s in liberal arts disciplines possess a number of attributes whose strength and usefulness to the non-academic sectors of society have been either underestimated or ignored.

Traditionally, the purpose, scope, and strength of a Ph.D. degree established with respect to the substantive dimension of the degree or the technical expertise that it imparts. Scholarly strength and standing in the professional community is a function of one's ability to find, describe, interpret, and creatively apply the substance of one's discipline.

But the substantive dimension of a Ph.D. program is only one and perhaps not the most important aspect of graduate liberal education. The formal or process dimension of such preparation may be its most enduring contribution. A Ph.D in a specific discipline may prepare an individual for a narrow range of careers in the short run. But more fundamentally, the degree prepares individuals to approach any job or career with a range of critical and helpful tools that increase the chances of

professional success over the long run.. I identify five components of graduate education that, if present in an individual, suggests his or her success as a manager or administrator.

1. Successful graduate education instills fluency in written and oral communication, sharp research skills, the critical analysis of problems, the accurate interpretation of data and facts, and synthesis. Graduate schools are committed to developing scholars with a specialist's depth, but they encourage the nurturing of thinking individuals who appreciate precision of thought, refinement of judgement, intellectual discrimination, and breadth.

2. Graduate education in the liberal arts emphasizes the epistemological fact that knowledge is interrelated. This assumption permits coherence in the learning process, and encourages the acquisition of insights from diverse fields as a necessary first step in decision-making . The best graduate educations encourage the development of international and multicultural experiences and perspectives, permitting individuals to move beyond the predictable and status quo to an appreciation of divergence, novelty, and competing frames of reference. Such a perspective is essential to the successful business manager today, who must be dedicated to acquiring functional solutions to problems.

3. Ph.D.'s in the liberal arts are "students of history" in the broadest sense of the word. Their dependence on historical precedent, insight, and perspectives assures an adequate time horizon. The past may at times hold the method or cipher to solving a problem in the present. At the same time, familiarity with thinking in terms outside the present aids in the development of a prospective vision. This "lengthening of the time frame" to include the future is a critical accomplishment that is at a growing premium in organizational management, where short-term parochial visions dominate the scene and are the root of any number of misjudgements in management strategy.

4. Graduate education instills the virtue of "deutero-learning" - or "learning-how-to-learn". Ph.D.s possess both a commitment to and facility with lifetime learning. In a rapidly changing environment where retraining, continuing education, and frequent career changes are par for the course, the ability to adsorb knowledge at will and comprehend it is of more importance than coming to a job already the master of a discrete body of knowlege.

5. Graduate education is inherently ethical (though not necessarily moral) in that it encourages critical reflection on morality. It raises questions of values and moral responsibility, and indicates their complexity. Engaging in ethical deliberation and critical reflection permits students to hone their analytical, problem-solving, and consensus-building

skills. It forces them to weigh moral against other considerations; to learn how ambiguity and tragedy invade decision-making; and how it may be possible to choose between irreducable goods. Finally, it teaches the importance of reason-giving, justification, and the necessity of constructing procedural constraints to shape and direct outcomes in situations where complete control is not possible.

Many of the popular justifications employed to legitimize the liberal arts are formal, humanistic, or deontological in nature. However, there appear to be valid utilitarian justification for such an education process as well: a graduate education in the liberal arts tradition is meritorious both for what it encourages one to aim for, and for what it permits one to accomplish.

Thesis 2. The results of graduate humanities and social science education are comparable to programs in management and business administration.

The formal abilities that Ph.D.s possess are in many cases the professional strengths and attributes valued by nonacademic sectors. In fact, an analysis of the content of leading management and business administration degrees reveals that such programs are similar in objective, formal structure, and the ability to instill specific characteristics in students to the best graduate liberal arts programs.

A business degree's strength lies in its commitment to critical analysis, independent thought, and creative synthesis. These abilities and strengths are valued as much by leaders in the academy and the public sector as by their counterparts in business. Both Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman, in their work In Search of Excellence, and Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in her work The Change Masters, note that the ability to deal with ambiguity and paradox, to relate theory to the phenomenological, to aim for simplicity and comprehension in planning and communication, and to adapt theory to the changing needs of the present are strengths highly sought after in business managers and administrators.

While claiming to be interested in describing this new management praxis, however, these authors fail to address the harder question of where and how such abilities are developed. But Roger Smith, Chairman and CEO of General Motors, observes that "the practice of management art and the pursuit of business excellence call for a set of non-technical skills...(that) can readily be acquired through liberal arts training."/2/

Smith's comments support my contentions that 1) liberal humanists have the potential to be solid managers, and 2) there may be advantages to encouraging Ph.D.s to move into business and management positions. The components of the linear management

style used to execute major research projects in graduate school (particularly the dissertation) correlate well with the structure of a process of management by objective now used in many business and government agencies. Problem definition and focus, multivariant research and analysis, evaluation through peer review, rigorious defense of one's proposals and the products of one's research, the development of consensus among project members, and the importance of project closure all appear to legitimate the Ph.D.s claim to a fairly sophisticated level of management experience. Add to this the Ph.D.'s developing skill at teaching, presentations, the motivation of students, and university administration through committee involvement, and you have in many academics the profile of a moderately experienced manager with technical as well as (hopefully) interpersonal skills.

Neither Smith nor I would claim that the pursuit of a Ph.D. is the best or only legitimate way to aspire to a non-academic management career. It is, rather, a minimalist argument that suggest that Ph.D. education, whatever its standing in the academic community, is a legitimate means of developing competent managers and administrators.

Thesis 3. The ability to place academics in non-academic careers need not undermine the autonomy and integrity of the liberal arts in particular, or higher education in general.

Rather, establishing the relevance of graduate education to other careers may ultimately vindicate liberal education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Encouraging and permitting Ph.Ds to move freely from their academic discipline to careers in other sectors of society will advance the long-term interest of the academy, these other sectors, and the individuals involved.

I have already outlined the resources and strengths that Ph.D.s bring to non-academic careers. The benefits to the individuals making such a transition should be obvious as well. A new career may in some cases rescue a person who simply wishes a change, or whose academic options have failed or did not ever exist. Ph.D.s need not feel that their substantive preparation locks them into a single career path for a lifetime. One's short term career aspirations (the attainment of a teaching or research job in a college) should not obscure the fact that one's education opens up a number of other options.

It is no more difficult to justify the argument that Ph.D. careers in management can advance the prospects of liberal and graduate education in general. Institutions of higher education will be strengthened if they can simultaneously develop individuals with specialized competencies in a range of fields, and offer these human resources to other sectors of society. It

is both in the university's and society's best interests to educate individuals in specialized graduate fields concurrent with our commitment to liberal education. Specificity, concreteness, and focus in discipline-based graduate education is necessary for the proper development and growth of a functional and productive society. This advocacy of specificity appears to contradict my more fundamental commitment to a broad-based liberal perspective. But my suggestion is that education for change is only achieved to the extent that, initially, it is imparted in a setting where formal abilities can develop in relation to concrete and tangible experiences. A Ph.D. in European diplomatic history, for example, will only be successful in a career as a financial consultant or policy analyst if that individual has developed formal and substantive skills in the context of studying a well-defined body of knowledge. Logical inference, research skills, and creative synthesis can be transferred to other tasks and disciplines once they are developed in a concrete context.

My conclusions may not sit well with some. I contend that graduate education, as it is presently structured in the European and American models, is generally on target in terms of both form and substance. What must change, it seems to me, are the presuppositions of transferability and relevance that are held by teachers, professors, students, and the leaders of a number of fields.

If we admit that it is legitimate for a person, all things being equal, to pursue whatever professional aspirations he or she desires, then universities ought to see it as their mandate to prepare these individuals to succeed in that chosen career. Colleges and universities must hold in tension a commitment to the maintenance of teaching and research on the one hand, and to the assistance of people to realize their aspirations on the other. If we can show Ph.D.s and their teachers that support of nonacademic career options is legitimate, then universities will have no problem maintaining the large pool of talent from which they may then preferentially select the best and the brightest for teaching and research.

Thesis 4. The Movement of Ph.D.s into business, government, and not-for-profit sectors will enhance greater pluralism in these settings, and sustain democratic institutions.

In giving Ph.D.'s the chance to succees in management, we may also encourage a more permanent relationship between universities and business that recognizes interdependence and the need for mutual support and respect.

My claim is not so much that graduate and liberal education assures democracy, as it is that Ph.D.s who are critically educated can contribute to the continual rejuvenation of their

society. Paul Ricoeur, is his seminal work Freud and Philosophy, has described well the emergence of a "hermeneutic of suspicion" in modern Western thought; a critical praxis that permits the deconstruction and dismantling of social and philosophical structures that are tired, outmoded, or of litle use. My argument, however, would go beyond the deconstructionist's assertion: it seems that the liberally educated Ph.D. can offer, as well, the impetus for invention, reconstruction, and synthesis. That is what is required for a democracy to flourish, and permitting that process to develop in an orderly and humanistic way is the essence of an open society.

* * *

Not all Ph.D.s will make the transition to a new management career gracefully; find that career to their liking; or be able to provide their employer with every desired trait. Ph.D.s may possess a complement of the attributes that I've just outlined, but experience has shown that they bring to the career transition a set of liabilities (perceived or real) as well. Liabilities may be too harsh a word: limitations may more accurately reflect the fact that these deficits can be reversed, but require a firm understanding of their traits, and a strategy for transcending them.

First, Ph.D.s need to recognize that their education encourages autonomous thinking and an individualistic approach to the exercise of one's tasks. While business and other employers appear to encourage self-initiative and self-motivation, the business community does not reflect the academic community's most cherished anarchistic tendencies. Put bluntly, academics have a hard time becoming team players, a basic requirement for keeping a bureaucracy running or managing a large business. And, as Carol Groneman and Robert Lear note, academics may be resistant to relinquishing ownership of the products of their work and academic title, and be unwilling to sign off in the name of their department or company./3/

Second, while the present academic environment may appear to insiders to be rather competitive and cutthroat, especially with regards to tenure, academics have a reputation outside their community as individuals who avoid risk and are fairly unassertive with co-workers and supervisors. While such a criticism might appear laughably hippocritical coming from a number of nonacademic professions, it is a stereotype that academics in part reflect and need to overcome. Academics need to realize that the presumptions of non-academic sectors concerning assertiveness and risk-taking are the reverse of the academic communities code of behavior and etiquette. The presumption in business is that assertiveness is generally a virtue. In the academic community, brashness and assertiveness are to be avoided except under extenuating circumstances.

Third, Ph.D.s need to apply their lessons in ethics to their evaluation of business and academic institutions, and stop insisting that one is moral and the other is not. Moving into business is no more "selling out" than working in the academy is de facto a contribution to humanity.

This paper has suggested that Ph.D.s may be, all things being equal, exceptional candidates for a number of management career paths. While I am an apologist for the position that suggests a meaningful and productive transition of abilities is possible for the individual who desires to move out of the academy into a management career, a much more modest claim is in order concerning the relationship between the academic life and the development of leadership characteristics. The strength of one's management profile does not guarantee success as a leader. True, one component of management involves the motivation and coordination of the activities of others in line with the desired ends or outcomes of a business or organization. But the exercise of that accomplishment is different in method, scope, and vision, from the requirements of a leader. The latter is able to create, inspire, motivate, direct, and empower others to visionary accomplishments. While certain holders of the Ph.D. may in fact possess the characteristics of a leader, I would suggest that the education process is neither designed with those vitures in mind, nor does it draw toward graduate study individuals who are likely to possess those traits.

Footnotes

/1/ Carol Groneman & Robert N. Lear, Corporate Ph.D.: Making The Grade in Business, with a forward by Roger B. Smith. New York; Facts a File, 1985, pp 84-85.

/2/ ibid, p. ix

/3/ ibid, p. 85.